

A Guide to Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot

the Jewish New Year's Day for Animals

When?

Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot, the New Year's Day for Domesticated Animals, occurs on the very first day of the Hebrew month of Elul; that's always exactly one month before the High Holy Days begin.

What?

There are four Rosh Hashana festivals in the Jewish calendar. The most familiar one precedes Yom Kippur and is the New Year's Day for Creation. The three other new year's days are: the New Year's Day for the royal calendar (Rosh Hashanah La'Melakhim), the New Year's Day for Tithing Fruit Trees (Rosh Hashanah l'Ma'aser Ilanot, a/k/a Tu Bishvat), and the New Year's Day for Tithing Domesticated Animals (Rosh Hashanah l'Ma'aser Behema). (This is all in Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1.)

Why?

Since the destruction of the Temple, there hasn't been any tithing, but this hasn't stopped Jews from reviving and celebrating the New Year's Day for Trees, Tu Bishvat. That's because trees are beautiful and our culture has long recognized we couldn't live without them. Most Jews don't even know there's a New Year's Day for Animals, but likewise we rely upon them and they rely upon us. We don't want to take them for granted or, heaven-forfend (*has v'shalom!*), neglect their suffering.

Our culture has long recognized that we have special responsibilities for the animals that our ancestors long ago domesticated. The Torah commands us to make sure that our animals have the same Shabbat that we have, and it is customary to recite this passage from the Ten Commandments in the Shabbat day Kiddush. We also have a tradition of compassion that prohibits us from causing any unnecessary harm to any creature (*tsa'ar baalei hayyim*, source: *Bava Metsia* 32a-33a). Life has been made very very difficult for the many species of animal that human beings have domesticated to benefit our lifestyle and diet. We can make their lives easier when we remember that they rely upon us for all of their needs.

During the month of Elul we have a special tradition called *heshbon nefesh* to reflect upon all of our relationships and to take responsibility for correcting them. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we ask God to take care of us as God's flock. It's only proper that before doing so, we take responsibility for our own flock — all the creatures that rely upon us for their welfare.

How can I celebrate?

There are many ways that people have begun to celebrate Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot. For ideas, including ones for kids, visit <http://opensiddur.org/new-years-day/for-domesticated-animals/> or, turn the page over for a Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot Shofar Blowing Ceremony ➔

Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot Shofar Ceremony

What you'll need:

1) Your community, or at the very least, some friends. 2) A shofar. 3) This guide.

What we're going to do:

1. Explain through a kavvanah why Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot is important.
2. Help each other count and acknowledge the animals we depend upon for our lifestyle and diet. Even if we can't currently tithe for Temple offerings, we can still take a personal census of all the animals in our life that we rely upon.
3. Commit ourselves to taking care of their welfare.
4. Blow the shofar and listen for the voice(s) of the animals calling upon us for their welfare.
5. Optional: Bless any/all animals present with the blessing for acknowledging beautiful creatures.
6. Recite Psalms 36:7 and Psalms 65.
7. Learn Jewish Animal Ethics with the Jewish Initiative for Animals Community Study Guide.

The Kavvanah

The first day of the new moon of Elul is the Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot — the New Year's Day for Tithing Domesticated Animals, as described in the Mishnah Moed 1:1 – "B'echad b'elul, Rosh Hashanah L'Maaser Behema" *באחד באלול ראש השנה למעשר בהמה*. The first of Elul is the Rosh HaShanah for tithing domesticated animals. On the day intended to count one's animals for sacrificial Temple offerings, take into account and consider how domesticated animals rely on humankind for their health and well-being and in what ways our lives rely upon those of domesticated animals.

On the first day of the new moon of Elul, we begin an accounting (*heshbon nefesh*) for all the souls with whom we are in a relationship. On a day dedicated to counting, this is an accounting for all of the souls in our community. Before we can expect to be forgiven our transgressions, we must examine these relationships thoroughly, and wherever possible, correct and heal them.

On Rosh Hashanah La'Behemot, the New Years Day for Domesticated Animals, we specifically take into account all those souls which we depend upon for our diet and lifestyle choices and which, in turn, depend upon us for their welfare and well-being — all the creatures that we (our society, and our ancestors before us) have brought from the category of **Hayot** (wild animals that can make their own living) into the category of **Behemot** (domesticated animals which depend upon us for their living).

Just as we depend on the Compassionate One (HaRaḥaman) for our sustenance, so too has humankind made many creatures dependent upon our welfare, directly through our need for them, and indirectly through our disruption of their ecosystem.

On the first day of Rosh Ḥodesh Elul when the shofar is blown to remind us to begin our preparation for Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, consider all the animals that were once domesticated and now live as homeless scavengers in our communities, all the animals being used for experiments intended to improve human life, all the animals kept captive to satisfy appetites for flesh and clothing made from their bodies.

The mitsvah in the Torah that demands our mindful awareness of the suffering of all living creatures is called *tsa'ar baalei ḥayyim*. We are forbidden to cause other creatures unnecessary suffering, and we are obligated not to turn away from, pass by, or neglect other creatures that have fallen under a burden that our fellow human beings have placed upon them.

Before we ask the blessed Holy One, our Shepherd, to take responsibility with care and compassion for their flock, we must show that we are taking care and responsibility for the flock that depends on us. We are liable for their care and we are liable for our impact together on our shared Earth — Adamah — which our god, Elohim, loves.

The Tithing

Take a personal census of all the creatures you are directly and indirectly in relationship with. In what way can you take responsibility for the animals on whom your lifestyle and diet depends? Take a moment, consider, and share your thoughts with a friend or someone next to you, then pause and listen for the voice of the animals in the sound of the shofar.

How many animals do you rely upon for your or your family's lifestyle and diet?

	Directly	Indirectly	How can you best improve their lives?
For clothing (shoes, hats, apparel)			
For food			
For companionship			
For recreation			
For health research			
For scientific study			
For soaps and beauty product testing			
For sacred use (e.g. as parchment)			
For work or transportation			
For entertainment (circuses, zoos, racing, etc.)			
For pollination			

The Shofar Blowing with Prayers

Instruction (to read aloud):

*On the first day of the month of Elul,
on the New Year's Day for all animals
that depend on us for their welfare,
when our thoughts turn inwards towards
correcting and healing all of our relationships,
listen for the voice of the animals in the sound of the shofar.*

(The shofar is blown once with one long tekiyah)

We have become as the Giants of the Generation of the Flood: tyrants on this planet, using its resources for ourselves and chasing its animals into the corners of the earth. The more our lifestyles and dietary choices disrupt the capability of Ḥayot (wild animals) to make their own living, the more we incur liability for their lives as creatures now depending upon us for their welfare.

Before we can make amends to one another this Elul Zman, we must first make amends to the vulnerable creatures who live among us. As we hear the cry of the shofar for the second time, may we hear in it the cry of all animals, behemot and Ḥayot, together with all our interconnected ecosystems supporting life on earth. May the One who is the breath of life guide us to protect the earth and make room in it for other creatures to thrive. (*The shofar is blown a tekiyah truah shevarim tekiah cycle.*)

We are grateful for all the good we receive from behemot, from domesticated animals. Some of us eat them, some wear their skins, some eat eggs and cheese, some use medicines and even organs that come from animals, some wear wool and silk, some write on Torah scrolls, wear tefillin, and blow shofarot that come from animal's bodies. Some of us do none of these things, but we benefit from the bee that pollinates the flowers and the worm that softens the earth.

May the One who is the breath of life cause us to be mindful of these gifts and never to waste them or take them for granted. (*The shofar is blown a tekiyah shvarim tekiyah cycle.*)

We bless all the creatures, Behemot and Hayot we are privileged to live with on the earth: the loving companion animals who live in our houses, the birds at our windows and in the forests, the burrowing creatures under our feet, the fish in the waters of our streams and oceans. We bless all the spirits, all the nefashot we are privileged to live with on the earth, the known and the unknown. May the One who is the breath of life bless all living things that we love and strengthen them. (*The shofar is blown a long tekiyah for the final time.*)

OPTIONAL: Bring forth any animals

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם,
שככה לו בעוֹלָמוֹ:

Blessed are you YHVH our elo'ah Cosmic Majesty that these are in your cosmos. (*Barukh atoh Adonai eloheinu, melekh ha-Olam, Shekakha Lo ba-Olamo*)

Psalms 36:7 declares that both the fate of humankind and its domesticated animals are preserved by Hashem.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; Your judgments are like the great deep; Human being (adam) and domesticated animal (beheima) you preserve, YHVH.

צדקהך בהריר-אל משפטך תהום
רבה אדס-ובהמה תושיע ה':

The Babylonian Talmud, in Rosh Hashana 8a, provides Psalms 65:13 as the source-text for determining when exactly the New Year's Day for titling domesticated animals should occur.

For the Leader. A Psalm. A Song of David. Praise waits for you, Elohim, in Tsiyon; and unto you the vow is performed. You who hears prayer; unto you does all flesh come. The tale of iniquities is too heavy for me; as for our transgressions, you will pardon them. Happy is the one whom you choose and bring near, that they may dwell in your courts; may we be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holy place of your temple! With wondrous works do you answer us in righteousness, elo'ah of our salvation; You are the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of the far distant seas; Who by your strength sets fast the mountains, who are girded about with might; Who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples; So that they that dwell in the uttermost parts stand in awe of your signs; You make the outgoings of the morning and evening rejoice. You have remembered the earth, and watered her, greatly enriching her, with the river of Elohim that is full of water; You prepare them corn, for so prepare you her. Watering her ridges abundantly, settling down the furrows thereof, You makest her soft with showers; You bless the growth thereof. You crown the year with your goodness; and your paths drop fatness. The pastures of the wilderness do drop; and the hills are girded with joy. The meadows are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with grain; they shout for joy, yea, they sing.

למנצח מזמור לדוד Shir: לך דמיה תהלה אלקים באיזון ולך ישלים-נדרא: שמע תפלה עדיך כל-בשר יבואו: דברי עונת גברו מני פשעינו אתה תכפרם: אשרי תברר ותקרב ישבען חצריך נשבעה בטוב ביתך חדש היכליך: נוראות בצדך תעננו אלקי ישענו מבטח כל-קצוי-ארץ וים רחיקים: מכין הרים בלחו נאזר בגבורה: משביב שאון ימים שאון גלייהם והמן לאמים: ויראו ישבי קצות מאותתיך מוצאי-בקר וערב תרנין: פקדת הארץ ותשකחה רבת תעשרה פלג אלקים מלא מים תפין דגנים כי-בן תכינה: תלמידה רוח נחת גודליה ברביבים ת מגננה צמחה תברך: עטרת שנת טובתך ומצעליך ירעפין דשן: ירעפי נאות מדבר וגיל גבעות תחרגנה: לבשו כרים הצאן ועמקם יעטוף-בר יתרזען אף-ישרו: